

# **Concerns raised over a continuing rise in sickness absence across West Lothian Council.**

## **Concerns have been raised over a continuing rise in sickness absence across West Lothian Council.**

The latest figures showed almost 20,000 days lost between April and September to mental health and behavioral reasons alone.

That is more than double the time lost for the next highest category – musculoskeletal 9,948 – and accounts for almost a third of all absences over the period this year.

The 19,691 days lost prompted the council's Conservative group leader to ask "when are we going to change?"

Claire Wallace, the Interim HR Services Manager, told a meeting of West Lothian's Corporate Policy and Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel (PDSP): "It is a national trend. We are not alone. This is seen right across the board."

Councillor Damian Doran-Timson asked: "I note that sickness when comparable to this time last year is greater and with a huge amount of absence for mental behavioural.

"What are we going to do moving forward? When are we going to change what we're actually doing to stop this increase of absence from council staff."

Ms Wallace said: "There's a number of things that we are doing at corporate and service level. Mental and behavioural is by far the highest. Personal stress is a significant factor and obviously it's difficult to influence that.

"However, we provide a range of support services, including our employee assistance programme. We are reviewing our sickness absence policy. We have gone through engagement and are now into consultation. We are hoping that will have an impact."

She pointed out that the council had won accreditation for its policies on allowances for staff who have caring responsibilities.

One of the highest reasons for personal stress has been care responsibilities. The council has developed flexible working to help people manage responsibilities and is also rolling out a stress audit tool trialled by staff in the Advice Shops to other council services.

"A number of the measures in the people strategy are aimed at improving wellbeing. We're improving the wellbeing framework reviewing the mental well-being policy to try and take a more holistic view."

In Operational Services there are schemes which are looking at men's mental health

Chairing the meeting council leader Councillor Lawrence Fitzpatrick, said: "As an administration we seek the best working relationships with our unions and all staff and we accept that certain people can come into difficulties at certain points in their life.

"But we continually look at and revise our policies to try and get people working and being effective."

A breakdown of the mental and behavioural absences showed that

personal stress was the main reason with 8,457 days lost between April and September. Work related stress accounted for 3,265 days lost. Other lost days in the category included: anxiety 3,921; depression 630, self-harm 183; panic attacks 150 and alcoholism 132.

After the meeting councillor Doran-Timson told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "The continuous rise in sickness absence is not acceptable, the council needs to address this and identify why this is happening.

"It is repeated every time the sickness levels are reported to elected members that there are processes in place, and all is being done. Quite obviously this is not working, and the council have a duty to their employees and the taxpayers of West Lothian to bring the sickness levels down drastically."#

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter